

# Southeast Asia's Geopolitical Context and Angkor Wat Art: Insights from India, Thailand, and China

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**Abstract:** *The geopolitics of Southeast Asian countries are different in culture, religion and political system. However, after many colonial and anti-colonial political movements, the countries in the region have become a community of shared destiny. India, Thailand and China, as countries with close geographical locations to Cambodia, have learned from and influenced each other in politics, religion and art during many exchanges in history. For instance, Hinduism had an important influence on the rule of the Angkor Dynasty. As the Khmer people and the Chinese had frequent diplomatic exchanges in military and economic trade, Chinese culture also penetrated the Angkor Dynasty. Thailand, part of the former Cambodian territory, has had centuries of entanglement with Cambodia. An important Buddhist building built during the Angkor Dynasty, Angkor Wat's architectural structure and the relief art on its internal walls is an extremely beautiful epic painting.*

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Angkor Wat Art, Cultural heritage, Southeast Asia, Cross-culture.

## 1. Introduction/Background

The history of Cambodia's founding can be traced back to the 1st century AD. The country has experienced the 'Funan Kingdom', 'Chenla Kingdom', 'Angkor Dynasty' and 'Phnom Penh Dynasty' periods. From the 9th–14th century, the Angkor Dynasty was culturally developed and reached its peak in the history of Cambodian civilization, which led to the birth of 'Angkor civilization'. The dynasty not only laid the foundation for Cambodia's writing and religion but also had a significant impact on Champa, Laos, Siam and other countries. There were many tribute payers then, such as the ancient Kingdom of Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia. Later, Cambodia gradually declined and was colonised by France, becoming its protectorate.

Owing to its geographical location, Cambodia has had frequent exchanges with its Southeast Asian neighbors through wars and trade since ancient times. India, Thailand and China have played a significant role in the rise and fall of the Kingdom of Cambodia. India's religious culture dominantly influences Cambodia's religious beliefs and political rule. Thailand was part of the Angkor Dynasty before 1238 AD. China has formed a diplomatic model of friendly mutual assistance with Cambodia in military, cultural and economic terms since 84 AD. Today, Southeast Asian countries have reached the point of cultural integration and symbiosis and are in dialogue with world civilization in a more powerful posture.

Cambodia gradually declined after the 15th century, and its economy remain unrecoverable even in the 21st century. After centuries of vicissitudes, Angkor Wat, a shining pearl in the history of Cambodia's founding, still exists and has become one of the most famous cultural heritages in the world. It symbolizes that its politics, religion and art culture have reached their peak. Teams of archaeological experts from several countries are involved, to this day, in Angkor Wat preservation, giving people today the opportunity to peek into its mysterious and glorious history, including the various Buddhist sculptures in it.

## 2. Cultural Diversity in Angkor Wat Literature Research

From ancient times to the present, Southeast Asian countries have naturally accumulated many historical materials during diplomatic exchanges. Historical data on Angkor Wat have been recorded through books, ancient architectural reliefs and Cambodian historical architectural reliefs, among others. The reliefs in Angkor Wat record life scenes of the people of Angkor, important political and cultural changes and religious beliefs that have influenced Cambodia to this day. The reliefs of Indian gods on the temple walls not only represent the core culture of sacrifice but also give people the highest level of visual enjoyment of beauty. These reliefs help us understand the religious beliefs of the ruling class then and the records of war deeds, in turn enabling future generations to better understand that period of history as well as the current global political landscape.

Although this article focuses on the influence of Indian, Thai and Chinese culture on the ancient architecture of Angkor Wat, it is not limited to their historical research. Countries worldwide have conducted in-depth research on Southeast Asian politics, culture, religion and art. 'The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia' (Tarling 1992) was jointly written by Southeast Asian experts and scholars worldwide—12 scholars from the United States, Britain, the Netherlands, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and others. This makes the literature truly culturally diverse. However, interestingly, scholars from different cultural backgrounds have different understandings of Angkor Wat—be it image understanding or language and writing, showing differences in the materials while also making them culturally diverse. German art historian and architectural historian Falser's (2019) 'Angkor Wat - A Cross-Cultural Heritage History' illustrates the formation of the concept of modern cultural heritage by depicting the colonial and post-colonial nationalism and global trajectory of cultural heritage. The book mainly revealed many unstudied dimensions of Angkor Wat in the modern history of the 12th century. It carefully combed through a conceptual and

interconnected history in the cross-cultural gap between European and Asian projects. 'The Heritage, History and Heterotopia of Angkor Wat' is a comment by Chemburkar on the second chapter of Falser's 'Angkor Wat: A History of Transcultural Cultural Heritage', noting the inextricable connection between Europe and Asia in terms of knowledge and architectural technology, including the cultural and entertainment activities of the Khmer people. The article also mentioned the documentary records made by Daguean (1981) while visiting Angkor, which made a valuable contribution to the subsequent research on Angkor civilization by other countries.

Ancient Indians rarely kept historical records, replacing them with religious texts and mythological epics instead. Indian Brahmanism had a very significant impact on Angkor civilization and was also the spiritual core of Angkor Wat's Buddhist art. However, due to the limitations of the Indian language dissemination area, Indian research documents on Angkor Wat are scarce; only some foreign academic journals and books have these documents. Indian archaeologist Srivastava led a special archaeological protection team to Angkor from 1982–1991, earning international praise for discovering and confirming the lost Kapilavastu. He investigated the close connection between Angkor Wat and Indian religious civilisation and published two books — 'Angkor Wat and Cultural Ties with India' (1987) and 'Apsarases at Angkor Wat, in Indian Context' (1994), which laid a valuable foundation for the subsequent Angkor archaeological research. O'Connor's (2009) 'Place, Power and People: Temple Traditions in Southeast Asia' compared the differences between Indian pagodas and Angkor Wat, including the influence of Indian religion on Angkor Wat. German Indologist Schlegel (1986) described and explained the iconography of Hindu gods—especially artworks—in 'The World of Indian Gods', contributing to the interpretation of Buddhist art in Angkor Wat.

Early Chinese historical research materials on Angkor Wat are few, with most mainly describing the life, trade and political diplomacy of the Khmer people in Chenla. Only Daguean's (1981) 'The Customs of Chenla' in the Yuan Dynasty contains a few documents on Angkor Wat. While the instruments used for studying Angkor Wat are now becoming increasingly advanced, the past stories of this cultural heritage can be analysed through its ancient architectural ruins and sculptures. Additionally, most of the documents on Angkor Wat are generic, mostly based on ancient Cambodia, although few truly describe the temple's images and its rich connotations. Ying (2016) studied the reliefs on the walls of Angkor Wat, collected various historical documents and images for in-depth research, and published 'Churning the Ocean of Milk: Gods and Kings in Angkor Temple'. The book provides an in-depth interpretation of the reliefs of the Indian myth 'churning the ocean of milk' in Angkor Temple from the Chinese cultural perspective and analyses the religious and political system of the Angkor Dynasty from the god-king culture of 'God-King as One' perspective.

Professor Shengyang discovered that the ideological connotations of the Buddha reliefs in Angkor Wat coincided with the thoughts of the Thai Dharma King. In 2018, she published a new insight — 'Exploring the Origin of the

Thoughts of the Thai Dharma King - A Comment on "Churning the Ocean of Milk: Gods and Kings in Angkor Temple"'—into Ying's article. Before this, Chinese scholar Shengyang and Thai scholar Xuyang published 'Exploration of the Cultural Connotations of the Legend of the Founding of Funan', exploring the national culture behind the icons of the gods in the reliefs of Angkor Wat. Thai scholar Giteau (2010) comprehensively summarised the history of the founding of Angkor and the origin of civilization and published 'History of Angkor'. In 'The King and the Making of Modern Thailand', Rappa, a scholar at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, attributed the formation of modern Thailand to a specific political system, Brahmanism and a Buddhist tradition styled after Hindu rituals. He also described Angkor Wat as 'floating like an Indian lotus on a lake', suggesting that Thailand, India and Cambodia share similar cultures.

Overall, literature on Angkor Wat and Asian geopolitics is aplenty; however, research analysing the impact of the geopolitical characteristics between India, Thailand, and China on Angkor Wat since ancient times is scarce. This is an academic gap, which adds a unique research dimension to reflect the cultural diversity of Angkor Wat.

### 3. Angkor Wat from the Southeast Asian Geopolitical Research Perspective

Throughout history, human civilizations have unconsciously learned from each other in various ways. The proximity of geographical locations makes it easier for different civilizations to communicate and integrate. The theory of geopolitics points out that a country is cyclical like an organism, and it is only a matter of time from prosperity to decline. Swedish political geographer Kjellen (1917) proposed the term 'geopolitics' in 'The State', defining it as 'the science of understanding the state as a geographical organism or spatial phenomenon', focusing mainly on the laws of state formation, development and decline. Flint (2021) wrote in 'Introduction to Geopolitics', 'the classic definition of geopolitics limits geographical types to those involving countries - such as wars between countries, border conflicts and empire building'. India, Thailand and China have all had co-operation and conflicts with Cambodia at different historical times, which has had different impacts on the rule of the Kingdom of Cambodia. The murals of Angkor Wat recorded some historical events, religious beliefs and royal rule of the Angkor Dynasty. Therefore, studying the murals and Buddha sculptures of Angkor Wat means studying the rise and fall of the Kingdom of Cambodia.

India, Thailand, China and Cambodia are geographically very close. They have achieved a model of co-existence and common development in the interaction and cultural exchanges since ancient times. This interdependent relationship can be seen from the Buddha sculptures in Angkor Wat. They do not only solve cultural differences but also learn from each other's cultural advantages. In 'A History of South-East Asia', British scholar Hall (1981) systematically studied Southeast Asian geopolitics, religion and culture, among which he explored the Indianised Southeast Asian countries and the disputes between Siam and ancient Cambodia. Simultaneously, New Zealand scholar Tarling's (1992) 'The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia'

fully absorbs the new historical and archaeological achievements of Southeast Asia before the 1990s. Scholars worldwide with different cultural backgrounds have varying views on Southeast Asia's religious and colonial history. Tallin's book explores the overall picture of the historical development of Southeast Asia from the entire region's perspective while also considering the characteristics of each country. Each chapter has its own characteristics yet closely related to each other. The territorial issue between Siam and ancient Cambodia also received corresponding attention in the book, suggesting that this is an important issue that cannot be avoided in the study of Southeast Asian history.

Cambodia, Thailand and China are influenced by Indian culture and Indian religion because of their adjacent geographical features. French scholar Thaydes' 'Indianized States in Southeast Asia' mainly focuses on the influence of Indian culture on Southeast Asian countries. Similarly, Hall paid attention to the influence of Indian culture on ancient Southeast Asian countries. He once said, 'My book "A History of South-East Asia" covers a much wider range of regions than "Indianized States in Southeast Asia" and covers a much longer period'. However, Thaydes' contribution as the first scholar to study Southeast Asia cannot be underestimated. Hall wrote,

To look at the history of Southeast Asia, one must use one's own point of view and not any other point of view, so that one can see it accurately. If this is true, then similar statements also apply to the culture of Southeast Asia. Because no matter what foreign cultural factors the people of Southeast Asia have adopted, they have made these factors their own very well. (1981, 8)

The Buddhist sculptures in Angkor Wat suggest Indian Brahmanism's profound influence on the ideology of the Angkor Dynasty. Indian Brahmanism won the hearts of the people for Cambodia's political rule. Under the evolution of history, the Cambodian and Thai leaders gradually adopted a theocratic way of governing the country. When India's Mahayana Buddhism was introduced to China, it did not have much impact on the regime nor did it play a fundamental role in the regime. The Cambodian and Thai cultures became more similar under the influence of Indian Brahmanism, while China was influenced by Mahayana Buddhism. Buddhism and Brahmanism had huge differences in their initial theology and doctrines; later, however, as they developed, they influenced and learned from each other. This gradually reduced the differences between the two Buddhists, blurring the boundaries between them.

Historically, Cambodia and Thailand share a close relationship despite the territorial disputes. Deth pointed out the 'love-hate' relationship between Thailand and Khmer in 'An Overview of Cambodia-Thailand Relations: From Hostility To Harmony?' Cambodia's Foreign Relations in Regional and Global Contexts improved the diplomatic relations between the two countries from the 13th century to 2014. The Angkor Dynasty (9th–14th century) was the most prosperous era for Cambodia, occupying all of present-day Cambodia, most of Thailand and Laos, Vietnam and southern Myanmar, and then declined from prosperity. The Thai people in the country began to grow and develop at the end of the

13th century, eventually becoming an independent country. Thailand went through the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Thonburi and Bangkok dynasties. During these periods, Thailand and Cambodia engaged in hundreds of years of disputes, with the latter being eventually annexed. The French army invaded Cambodia in the 19th century and signed the Franco-Thai Treaty with Thailand. Cambodia thus became a victim of the conflict of interests between France and Thailand, which laid the seeds for the later demarcation of the Cambodia-Thailand border.

Southeast Asia is now one of the regions with the greatest economic potential in the world. It has also realised the importance of win-win co-operation with China and other countries. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in Bangkok, Thailand (8 August 1967), and the secretariat was established in Jakarta, Indonesia. Cambodia, India and Thailand, important members of ASEAN, have established free-trade zones and active and friendly co-operative relations with countries such as China, Japan and the United States. The formation of this association has made the ASEAN structure a more powerful bargaining power for Southeast Asian countries when facing political and economic negotiations with major powers. In 2010, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Zone was fully established and has continued to achieve win-win cooperation to this day. In modern times, with the increasing exchanges between Southeast Asian countries, Angkor Wat has attracted widespread attention worldwide, driving Cambodia's tourism sector.

#### 4. Hindu Heroic Epics in Buddhist Sculptures at Angkor Wat

The unification and establishment of a regime often cannot be separated from the blessing of religion. The creation of the Angkor civilization is closely related to Indian Brahmanism. As mentioned in 'Indianized States in Southeast Asia', the establishment of the Angkor Dynasty is closely related to the Indian religious system. Indian Brahmanism has ruled Cambodia for thousands of years, and its teachings have influenced the governance policy of the Angkor Dynasty. The Hindu heroic epics 'Mahabharata' and 'Ramayana' not only played an enlightening role in the religious rituals, norms and philosophy of later generations but also reflected national contradictions and class struggles.

Suryavarman II (1131-1150), the founding king of the Angkor Dynasty, built Angkor Wat during his reign. The chief Brahman priest Devahara, who crowned the king, designed this temple for the king, which mainly worships the Hindu Brahman god Vishnu. Suryavarman II claimed to the world that he was the incarnation of Lord Vishnu on earth and had supreme status. Angkor Wat, located in the northwest of Cambodia, was originally named Vrah Vishnulok, meaning 'the temple of Vishnu'. There is a huge building complex around Angkor Wat. It is also known as Little Angkor; Big Angkor is Angkor City, the then capital of the Angkor Dynasty in Cambodia. Thailand, which emerged in the mid-13th century, defeated the Angkor Dynasty many times and captured the capital Angkor City for the first time in 1431. Angkor Wat was abandoned, and the deserted Angkor was gradually covered by forests. To avoid the threat of the Thais,

King Soriyopo moved the capital to Phnom Penh in 1434, and Cambodia gradually declined.

Hinduism has an important history of development. At the end of the Harappan civilization, the Aryans began to migrate as 'nomads' and fought against the indigenous Dravidians in northwestern India for 800 years. This period was called the 'Dark Ages' in India. All knowledge came from religious scriptures, which were compiled into 'Vedanta' after AD. In the late Vedic period (approximately 600 BC), the Hindu pantheon was dominated by the trinity of Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma—all of whom were supreme gods and creators. These gods, respectively, symbolise the three aspects of the world since its creation—creation, maintenance and destruction, and these aspects eventually became inseparable. India's religious history shows that 'besides elevating one god to the position of commanding other gods, people also regard different gods as the incarnation of the same god'. This idea of fusion and unity reached its peak in the 'Vedic' period. Later, this 'trinity' idea was challenged and gradually evolved into a continuous cycle of creation, maintenance and destruction.

Usually, the three gods of Hinduism are worshipped separately by the world. Later, Shiva surpassed Brahma and became the highest god. Shiva symbolises destruction, while Vishnu symbolises auspiciousness and peace. The statue of Vishnu, worshipped by Suryavarman II in Angkor Wat, symbolises the metaphor of 'maintainer' and 'protector' and is also, then, the vision of the ruler, who hoped for long-term peace and prosperity. In the ancient Indian tradition, Vishnu originally symbolised the sun god, and his name also means 'omnipresent' and 'everywhere' like the sun. Vishnu's three steps are likened to the movement of the sun: rising from the east to the zenith, and then suddenly falling from the zenith to the west. In the Indian religious tradition, the concept of eternal reincarnation and the opposition between demons and gods has emerged, and Vishnu has accordingly become the role of the maintainer. In most images of Vishnu, he is dressed in yellow and has the appearance of a middle-aged or young man with four arms. Hinduism believes that Sakyamuni Buddha is the ninth incarnation of Vishnu.

In Cambodian monuments, Naga can be seen almost everywhere there is water. In Indian mythology, Naga, the nine-headed snake, is a snake god. It resembles a cobra and usually lives underground or on the water surface. It is the patron saint of water. Simultaneously, Naga has various forms with 5, 7 and 9 heads. In ancient Indian mythology, Naga often appears in human form:

Vishnu rescued the elephant from the water, and the aquatic monster was described as a crocodile. But in the Deoghar bas-relief, it clearly presents the form of Naga, combining the human and snake forms in the way of a mermaid, and wrapping the elephant's feet with the snake's tail. There is also a Naga with a similar appearance beside Naga, but it is much smaller, and both have common hoods. The male Naga's hood is composed of seven cobra heads. (Vogel 1995, 45)

Naga also symbolises the concepts of order and rebirth. There is a saying that the universe was first born by a big snake stirring the milky ocean.

The position of the gods in heaven depends on the political struggles in India, mainly referring to the wars of the 'Vedic Age' (1000–500 BC). The great Hindu epics 'Mahabharata', 'Ramayana', the 18 'Puranas' and various treatises and scriptures provide us with the process of their integration and development. Hinduism inherited the doctrines of Brahmanism, still believes in Brahmanism and supports and actively promotes the view that matter exists in the form of cause and effect and reincarnation, among others, although different from the doctrines and rules of Brahmanism. Brahmanism has three major doctrines: 'Vedic revelation, omnipotence of sacrifice and Brahman above'. Brahmanism declares that the world's Brahman is 'the god of the world', so it uses religion to explain the reincarnation of life and the law of survival of all things to the world.

The reliefs on the walls of the first corridor of Angkor Wat depict the long heroic epics of Hinduism — 'Mahabharata' and 'Ramayana'. These epics describe the struggle for the supreme throne among the descendants of the royal family, including the moral values and value systems of good and evil in the world extracted from the war. These carvings not only show religious beliefs but also reflect the then social culture and values. Elements of the 'Monkey Kingdom' and 'Battle' in the Indian epic 'Ramayana' often appear on the murals of Angkor Wat. For example, the general who is fighting has a monkey's face, showing a kind of nihilistic mystical aesthetic. Most of the characters on these reliefs are wearing armor and holding weapons, and these images describe various tactics, showing the image of the Khmer people's bravery and war. The image of the Indian myth of churning the ocean of milk is carved on the east wall of Angkor Wat, which is very lifelike. The painting of the war between Vishnu and the demon king is carved on the north wall, and the picture has a sense of rhythm. The scene of the monkey god rescuing Rama on the west wall is also very realistic. These carvings put the viewer into the Indian mythological epic.

## 5. Dual Manifestation of Indian God-king Belief in the Royal Rule of Thailand and Chenla

Thailand and Cambodia have been in constant dispute since ancient times, not only because of their geographical proximity but also because they share extremely similar cultural backgrounds. Since the Ayutthaya era, the Thai king has become a god-king and has been officially recognised by Brahmanism. The core of the belief in the god-king is that the king is a living being, an incarnation of the gods in the world, and he rules the people on behalf of the gods. The royal power is a very noble and awe-inspiring existence in Thailand. People believe that 'the king is the perfect unity of the three gods, Buddha and king' (Shuzhi 2004, 87). The Thai rulers instilled the idea of 'born to be king' in the people, and the royal power naturally had a sacred and unquestionable authority. The monarchs of ancient India usually used mythological stories such as 'Ramayana', 'Mahabharata' and 'Puranas' as templates and used Sanskrit as a literary form of expression to deify themselves as supreme or omnipotent gods to achieve the purpose of consolidating their rule.

Angkor Wat symbolises the kingship of the Angkor Dynasty. The Indian heroic epics carved on the wall naturally set off the

core idea of 'God and King as One'. 'Churning of the Ocean of Milk' (Samudra Manthan), one of the representative mythological stories in India, shows the greed of God for immortality and trying to reset the order of the universe. The image of Indra in the murals of Angkor Wat expresses the idea of 'Divine Right of Kings' (Ying 2016, 167), highlighting the supreme authority of Indra as the God King. Ying believes that the 'Churning of the Ocean of Milk' is essentially a description of an armed struggle to kill lawbreakers:

The enemy must be a powerful and disorderly villain. His illegal behavior has caused great suffering to the world, and the gods are helpless. So, in a cowardly silence, Indra, the most brave and fearless of the gods, stood up and fought fiercely with the lawbreakers with the support of the highest god. In the end, he successfully killed the villain and was crowned the king of gods. (2016, 133)

Most of the relief murals in Angkor Wat depict gods and demons in the 'Puranic Books' stories. Asura, the god and demon with the strongest divine power, occupies the largest area of the murals. Later, the god king Indra used the vajra to wipe out Asura, winning back a game for the camp of the gods and laying the foundation for the subsequent victory.

The Hindu doctrines used by the Chenla Kingdom also influenced the royal rule of Thailand. The monarch's autocratic rule is based on the principle of divinity, and the concept of royal power is generally recognised in the political concepts of Buddhist countries throughout South Asia and Southeast Asia. 'The Development of Thai Culture' states:

Like the Brahmanic or Hindu temples of the Khmer culture of Cambodia, the temple architecture and planning of the contemporary Khmer culture of Thailand are models of Brahmanic or Hindu cosmic planning; temples or devalas are built, and images of the highest gods of various sects are erected inside them. (Fine Arts Department 1993, 125)

The murals of Angkor Wat also record the war between the Angkor Dynasty and ancient Thailand. In the 12th century, the Angkor Dynasty had expanded to most of today's Thailand. In 1431, Siamese soldiers returned to the capital Sukhothai in triumph, bringing back the Hindu Buddhism of the Angkor Dynasty, which was the prototype of the ideology of the later Thai God King's rule.

The Angkor Dynasty has long been deeply influenced by the concept of Indian monarchy. As a former general of the Angkor Dynasty, Khun Bangkrang Dao of the Sukhothai Kingdom naturally continued this monarchical concept, combining the title of the king with the title of the god in Indian religion and deifying the king's rule. The title of the king of the Thai Kosut Dynasty first experienced a transformation from Indrati, Ramakhanaga to King Bodhidharma. The changes in these titles show that the religious beliefs in Thailand during this historical period constantly evolved. The founding king of Sukhothai, Sri Indra, corresponds to 'Auspicious Indra King'. 'Sri' means 'auspicious' in Sanskrit, and 'Indrati' corresponds to 'Indra God King', who is the god king who commands the three realms of heaven, earth and man. In Hindu mythology, Indra is regarded as a war god who benefits the people and is a very

important god in Hinduism. Indrati, the founding king of the Kingdom of Sukhothai, was crowned before the official birth of the Kingdom of Sukhothai and by Jayavarman VII of the Angkor Dynasty. This awarding ceremony promoted the close connection between the historical bloodline of the Angkor Dynasty and the Kingdom of Sukhothai, thus creating an immortal legend of the inheritance of Indian royal thoughts between the two dynasties. The title of the third king of Thailand, Ramakhamhaeng (reigned from 1279–1298 AD), was also called 'Palanghamhaeng', which is a transliteration of Sanskrit, meaning 'brave King Rama'. King Rama is the protagonist of the Indian epic 'Ramayana', where he defeats the demon king Ravana and saves his beloved wife Sita. Rama was brave and good at fighting, with boundless magical powers. He was deeply loved by the people of Southeast Asia and was hailed as an invincible hero. In the middle and late period, the title of the king of the Sukhothai Kingdom became King Dharma, and successive kings since then have also used this title. In the Brahmanism 'Rig Veda', Dharma is a transliteration of Sanskrit, meaning to 'support' and 'maintain'. Later, after the emergence of Buddhism and Hinduism, this word continued to be used. The titles of successive monarchs of Thailand are consistent with the concept of 'God and King as One'.

The source of the divinity of the Thai king generally does not come from the divinity of the god king himself, but from his divinity as the Dharma King. The ruler combined the political power of the king's responsibilities, roles and behaviors in Hinduism and Buddhism and gave the people fairness and justice. In 'King as God, God as King: Temporality and Eternity in Indian Art', Huntington writes,

On one level, each image depicts a Hindu god in one of his typically heroic feats; on another level, each image can also be shown to refer to a historical human king and his heroic deeds in the performance of his duties. In most cases, the identity of the god is clear, as confirmed by the description of the god in the literary material and by correspondence with other images associated with the god. (1994, 30–38)

The reliefs in the corridors of Angkor Wat reflect the then god king culture. The Dharma messenger placed the code on top of Mount Sumeru, which symbolised that Suryavarman II was determined to become the Dharma King. This means that the idea of the Dharma King is also contained in the god king culture of Vishnu. However, Vishnu's Dharma King concept was not well developed in the god king culture of Angkor but was more effectively promoted and used in the Siam region. As Southern Buddhism spread in Thailand, later kings used the title of 'Dharma King' related to Buddhism, which also reflected the close relationship between the Thai Dharma King thought and Buddhism.

The stability of social order and the stability of royal power are based on moral education, which is also the core element of the long-term formation of Thai law. The Thai code is different from the Hindu code, which contains profound ideas of Buddhist philosophy and the origin of the universe. Shengda (1996) emphasised the importance of Buddhism to the rule of Thailand in 'History of Cultural Development in Southeast Asia'. The code stipulates that 'the king must abide by the five precepts and eight precepts of Buddhism, and

officials must pay attention to the spread of Buddhism' (Shengda 1996, 282). Engel (1975) wrote in 'Thai Law and Kingship during the Reign of King Chulalongkorn',

The king can interpret the law, but cannot make it. The role of Manu is to be promoted to heaven until he reaches the wall surrounding the world. This wall is engraved with sacred laws, and Manu reads and repeats these laws to King Maharam. In the Thai version, these laws become the basis of the code. (8)

Because Thailand and Cambodia have had close exchanges since ancient times, the development history of the Angkor Dynasty naturally borrowed from the idea of deifying the king in Thailand to better consolidate the kingship.

Since the ancestors of Thailand—the Thai people—were originally part of the Cambodian nation, they (ruled by the Khmer people) continued to wage war against the Angkor Dynasty after becoming stronger. The Angkor Dynasty declined with the rise of its Thai people, and the capital of Cambodia, Angkor Wat, was abandoned in the long struggle with Thailand. Moreover, Cambodia's history and culture overlapped with Thailand in many places, and the Angkor Wat monuments were often regarded by Thais as the product of their own country. Often, there were disputes over the ownership of Angkor Wat on various occasions. In the second part of Falser's 'Angkor Wat - A History of Cross-Cultural Heritage', it is recorded that

Around 1860, King Rama IV (Mongkut) initially proposed to replicate Angkor Wat in Bangkok, but this idea was only preserved for future generations in the internal chronicles of the royal family. (Falser 2019, 416)

Therefore, future generations saw a small model of Angkor Wat in the Thai royal palace. This model was built according to the Cambodian Angkor Wat ordered by the then King Rama IV.

## 6. Diplomacy Between China and the Kingdom of Chenla from the 'Tomb of Lu Ban' in the 'Records of Chenla Customs'

Since ancient times, successive Chinese regimes have maintained close ties with the Cambodian regime, and the trade between them has never stopped. Cambodia was strong during Suryavarman II's reign and began interacting with the Northern Song Dynasty of China. China has research and historical records on the Kingdom of Chenla as early as the Sui and Tang Dynasties; later, different dynasties all had related works on the ancient Kingdom of Chenla. 'Book of Sui-Chenla', 'Old Book of Tang-Chenla', 'New Book of Tang-Chenla', 'Island Barbarians', 'Chenla Customs' and 'Ming History-Chenla' are all records of the development history of Cambodia in different Chinese dynasties. Like the Yuan Dynasty, the Angkor Dynasty also experienced a change of monarchs. Indravarman III replaced King Jayavarman VIII and became the new king. Beginning of the 19th century, France began to invade the Indochina Peninsula, and 'The Customs of Chenla' began to attract the attention of Western sinologists. The book was translated into French, Japanese, English, Cambodian and German.

In 1296, during the Yuan Dynasty, Dagan (1981) visited the Angkor Dynasty as an envoy, and an important work recording the customs and historical culture of the Cambodian region, 'The Customs of Chenla', was born. He called Angkor Wat 'Lu Ban's Tomb': 'Lu Ban's Tomb is about one mile outside the south gate of (Angkor Royal City), with a circumference of ten miles and hundreds of stone houses' (44). According to Pelliot's annotations quoted by Xia Nai, 'Lu Ban' here refers to Vishwakarma, the god of craftsmanship in Hindu mythology, not Gongshu Ban in China. Dagan believes that the architectural style of Angkor Wat is simple and plain, unlike the magnificent temples of Mahayana Buddhism in China. In 'Records of Cambodia', Dagan described Angkor Wat as 'no bells, drums, mirrors, banners, or canopies' (94), meaning 'no bells, drums, mirrors, money, flags, or altars'. There was only a clay Buddha statue covered with gold foil in the room.

Furthermore, Dagan recorded the method of using Indian palm leaves to write historical materials in the Angkor Dynasty. This method was well used until the 20th century and was very common in writing religious and historical books. India and the Angkor Dynasty have frequent exchanges in history. The earliest introduction to the Angkor Dynasty was not only religious beliefs, ruling methods and culture but also the original medium for recording history—'palm leaves'. In fact, almost all historical activities of the Angkor Dynasty were recorded on 'palm leaves' made of native Indian palm leaves. These leaves cannot be preserved for a long time and will disappear due to weathering and drying into powder. Later, historical materials engraved on stone appeared, which are the inscriptions and architectural reliefs engraved on thick stone slabs, walls on the left and right sides of stone pillars, and doorposts. These inscription stones are 1–3 m high and 0.5–1 m wide. They are built in front of temples or ancestral halls as signs to remind people to donate or offer sacrifices to the temples. Therefore, historians can understand the genealogy of the kings of the Angkor Dynasty and the historical details of various dynasties in Cambodia more accurately through the interpretation of the inscriptions and the records of ancient Chinese books. Furthermore, archaeologists have found in Khmer inscriptions solid information about pre-Angkorian and Angkorian Cambodia, while when Sanskrit texts deal with the same topics as Khmer texts, the former are abbreviated paraphrases. Information about 'daily life', 'peasants', 'society and economy' and even 'rulers and the state' is found only or mainly in Khmer texts.

The reliefs of Angkor Wat depict many scenes of trade and cultural exchanges between China and Chenla. In 'Confrontation, Adaptation and Integration-Nationalism and Interethnic Relations in Southeast Asia', Yande emphasised that Southeast Asian cultures have experienced a process of confrontation, adaptation and integration in the process of diplomacy. The Angkor Dynasty gradually integrated Chinese behavior habits and clothing during hundreds of years of exchanges with them. These murals show the daily life utensils and economic conditions of the Khmer people. Fishing, pottery making and sugar making, among others, are all very popular occupations among the Khmer people. Today, Cambodia still shows what Dagan of the Yuan Dynasty mentioned in 'Records of Cambodia':

All the trades in the country are done by women... Every day, they trade from dawn to noon. There are no shops, but they spread mats and the like on the ground, each with a fixed place, and I heard that some of them pay rent to the government. (1981, 146)

This means that in the country, women are engaged in trade, and every day, the market starts at 6 in the morning and ends at noon. Because there are no shops with people living in the market, people are scattered on the ground to conduct business. Everyone has their own fixed stalls, and I suppose these stalls pay rent.

The scene depicted in the relief in the picture above is the Chinese and ancient Cambodians trading fish and holding scales. As an important tool for business transactions since ancient times, the weight of the scale showed the characteristics of fairness and precision back then, adding transparency and trust to the trade process of both parties. The weight of the scale is regarded as a very important instrument for the market economy and Cambodian fishery trade and played an irreplaceable and important role in the trade between China and Cambodia in ancient times.

According to the latest report of the General Department of Customs of Cambodia, in the first 10 months of 2024, the bilateral trade volume between Cambodia and China reached 12.37 billion US dollars, an increase of 23% year-on-year, further consolidating China's position as Cambodia's largest trading partner (Chengyuan 2024). In fact, the international cooperation in foreign trade between China and Cambodia can be seen in the book 'Records of Chenla' in the Yuan Dynasty. The two countries have formed a community of destiny in the process of development and evolution from ancient times to the present. Hall mentioned in 'Commercial Development of Angkor and Champa in the Eleventh Century' that the monarch of a country needs to have strong economic capital and a vast territory to have a stable royal rule:

Since land income is the main source of the ruler's exercise of sovereignty and provides him with economic and symbolic capital for building an alliance network, the successful monarchs of these countries must have great personal charm or more personal disposable economic resources than the potential rulers of the competing elites in their territory. (1985, 183–208)

Therefore, China and the Kingdom of Chenla established a friendly and mutually supportive co-operative relationship, which not only increased trade with China but also increased the international competitiveness of the economy, as well as contributed to the rational allocation and optimization of the internal resources of Chenla.

Besides frequent economic and trade exchanges between China and Cambodia, the two countries formed an alliance in many military activities. Both countries seek development through mutual assistance. During the Xining period of the Northern Song Dynasty, the Song Dynasty and the then Chenla jointly attacked the Annan army. This was the first time in history that China and Cambodia joined forces to fight the enemy. The murals of Angkor Wat also engraved images of the army going to war, including not only the Angkor army

but also Chinese Song Dynasty troops. The military caps of the army dressed in Han Chinese costumes are very different from those of the Khmer army. Those soldiers have their hair in a bun, wear golden crowns and have phoenix eyes. However, there is a difference between the hair crowns worn by soldiers and generals. The soldiers' hair buns look simpler than those of generals. The Thai army look more barbaric than the Chinese army, without armor, too many decorations and barefoot without shoes. As the 'Military Horses' chapter of 'Chenla Customs' states,

Military horses are also naked and barefoot, holding spears in their right hands and war shields in their left hands. They have no bows, arrows, cannonballs, or armor. It is said that when they attacked the Siamese, they drove the people to fight, and often had no wisdom or plan. (1981, 181)

This shows that the Angkor army was unarmed in the war. They did not use powerful weapons and equipment in the battle with the Thais nor forced the people to join the battle—primarily no tactics. At the end of the Yuan Dynasty and the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, China was in a period of dynasty change, and the Kingdom of Chenla also had internal disputes. After the establishment of the Ming Dynasty, Chenla, which had long been worried about foreign invasions, took the initiative to strengthen exchanges with China, hoping to get help from the Ming Dynasty. It was not until 1444 AD that the King of Chenla was forced to abandon Angkor City due to the invasion of Siam, and the Angkor Dynasty officially perished. During the French colonial period, Cambodia suspended diplomatic relations with China for approximately 500 years. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Cambodia was occupied by French colonists, and the Kingdom of Cambodia did not officially declare independence until 9 November 1953. On 19 July 1958, Cambodia officially re-established diplomatic relations with China.

However, historical evidence cannot be studied unilaterally from Chinese historical materials but requires critical thinking from multiple dimensions. Mabbett and Chandler's (1995) 'The Khmers' attempts to analyse and 'piece together' the history of the Khmers and the Kingdom of Cambodia from the perspective of Western countries. Vickery (1996) made relevant comments on their book and was skeptical of China's historical research, believing that

Mabbett and Chandler fell victim to their enthusiasm for maintaining the old framework, and new evidence was imposed on the old framework. In this case, the old framework is an interpretation of China's reports on Chenla. (389–404)

Vickery further pointed out that Mabbett and Chandler paid little attention to and used the Khmer records, and even if they used them, they could not really understand the meaning and often misread them.

## 7. Conclusion

The development history of Cambodia has always been a 'hot spot' in Southeast Asia. The United Nations has spent significant manpower, material and financial resources on the

Cambodian issue, showing the importance the world attaches to the Cambodian issue. Although Southeast Asian countries are very close culturally and geographically, they have slightly different ethnic origins. Since ancient times, trade exchanges and territorial disputes in Southeast Asia have been traced in the historical materials of Angkor Wat. Among them, India, Thailand and China have played a significant role in the rise and fall of Cambodia. In the 21st century, archaeological teams from various countries have rediscovered the value of this cultural heritage and provided precious historical materials for the formation of modern people's worldview. The above three countries have successively sent experts to Angkor Wat to conduct archaeological research and ancient building restoration work and have assumed the responsibility of educating local Cambodian technicians. In recent years, Thailand has abandoned its hostility towards Cambodia and expressed that it can train local technicians to restore the Angkor Wat monuments and returned 17 cultural relics that flowed into Thailand during the war. The research on the Buddha sculptures of Angkor Wat by countries around the world today is not only a new understanding of the ancient civilizations in the Asia-Pacific region but also an affirmation of the position of world cultural diversity.

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